

## **ORIGINS OF CHINA EXPLORATION AND TRADE**

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/ancient/ancient-chinese-explorers.html>

### **MARCO POLO**

*Polo was a Venetian traveller and writer who was one of the first westerners to visit China.*

Marco Polo was born in around 1254 into a wealthy and cosmopolitan Venetian merchant family. Polo's father and uncle, Niccolò and Maffeo Polo, were jewel merchants. In 1260, they left Venice to travel to the Black Sea, moving onwards to central Asia and joining a diplomatic mission to the court of Kublai Khan, the Mongol ruler of China. Khan asked the Polo brothers to return to Europe and persuade the pope to send scholars to explain Christianity to him. They arrived back in Venice in 1269.

In 1271, they set off again, accompanied by two missionaries and Marco, and in 1275 reached Khan's summer court. For the next 17 years the Polos lived in the emperor's lands. Little is known of these years, but Marco Polo was obviously popular with the Mongol ruler and was sent on various diplomatic missions which gave him the opportunity to see many parts of China.

Around 1292, the Polos offered to accompany a Mongol princess who was to become the consort of Arghun Khan in Persia. The party sailed from a southern Chinese port via Sumatra, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), southern India, and the Persian Gulf. After leaving the princess in Iran, the Polos travelled overland to Constantinople and then to Venice, arriving home in 1295.

The Polos eventually departed for Europe and reached Venice in 1295. Marco became involved in a naval conflict between Venice and Genoa and in 1298 was captured by the Genoese. In prison, his stories attracted the attention of a writer from Pisa, Rustichello, who began to write them down, frequently embellishing them as he went. The resulting book was extremely popular and was translated into many languages under a number of titles, including 'The Million' and the 'Travels of Marco Polo'.

After Polo was released he returned to Venice, where he remained for the rest of his life. He died on 8 January 1324.



## THE SILK ROAD

The Silk Road is actually the **collective name** given to a number of ancient trade routes linking China and Central Asia.

### **Silk**

Silk, the most luxurious fabric of all, was almost **exclusively made in China** until the secret was revealed in the 7th century to the West. This precious commodity attracted Central Asian merchants, who in exchange brought horses, cattle, furs, hides, and luxuries, such as ivory and jade, to China.

**New goods** were also introduced to the Chinese by the traders: cucumbers, walnuts, sesame seeds, figs, alfalfa, and pomegranates, as well as **new skills**, e.g. using grapes to make wine, enriching China's ancient civilization.

## **The Silk Road in the Han Dynasty**

Originally, the Chinese traded silk within the empire, from the interior to the western borders.

From then on the merchants traveled on this route safely, and began to carry silk from China to other parts of the world.

**Marco Polo** (1254–1324) traveled along the Silk Road visiting the Yuan capital city Dadu (today's **Beijing**). In his **famous book about the Orient** he mentions a special passport in the form of a board. It was issued by the Yuan government to the merchants to protect their trade and free movement within the country.

Other preferential treatment was also given to the merchants, and trade boomed, silk traded for **medicines, perfumes, slaves, and precious stones**.

As overland trade became increasingly dangerous, and travel by sea became more popular, trade along the Silk Road declined. While the Chinese did maintain a silk-fur trade with the Russians north of the original Silk Road, by **the end of the fourteenth century**, trade and travel along the route had **decreased** significantly.